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the village VOICE

THE AIDS DRUG HUSTLE

AZT's False Promise

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A SURVIVOR'S GUIDE TO RADIO HELL

New York's Best Station Broadcasts From a Jersey Basement

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WFMU, 91.1

RADIO FREE JERSEY

New York's Best Station Comes From an East Orange Basement

Lounging around the coke machine in the lobby of Froeberg Hall, everybody looks frisky. I bet dollars to dog nuts most of these young adults at Upsala College—a Lutheran school of 1300-1400 nestled in the bosom of East Orange, New Jersey—I bet they don't even know what's going on downstairs. Fine. Tonight there's a meeting at radio station WFMU, with 22 staffers and station manager Ken Freedman squeezed into a space that looks very much like, well, a basement in New Jersey. There's a rusty red, tamped-down shag carpet, a fireplace with fake logs, and a bowling trophy and kids' books on the mantle. Freedman points out the new leaks in the ceiling. Bart Plantenga, editor of *Lowest Common Denominator*, the station's fanzine/joke-book/poetry journal that thinks it's a program guide, talks about the next issue. "One comment about programming," says Freedman. "There's been so much television and video programming of late. It's my opinion that there's nothing inherently creative about 10 minutes of Bugs Bunny anymore. If you're going to use it there's nothing wrong with that, but try to make creative use of what you're taping off television."

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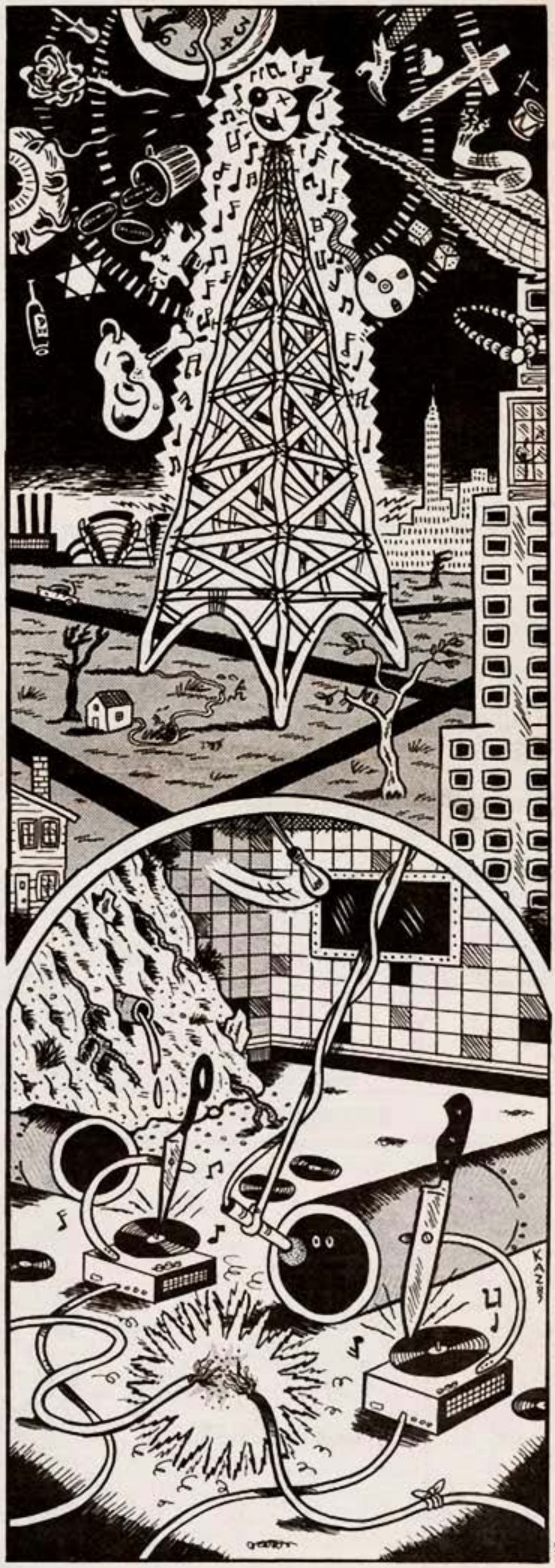
BY RJ SMITH



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Here's the best radio station my crystal set's ever pulled in, sound clips from old episodes of *Mister Ed* and all. There's a HoJo's ice cream case full of music—country, blues, gospel, rock, and R. Stevie Moore—but that's not what holds the orange roof up. The station's got personality. Music sounds different here. WFMU staffers use music, conversation, phone calls, the tones of their voices, to create an inhabitable space. This is a *show*. Radio programs and DJs may have followings, but WFMU has Jeff Grieco, who writes approximately 1000 letters a year to the station's DJs. (Grieco says: "If you listen for a long enough time, you feel like the DJ's are family.")

Here might also be the best station you've never heard; it's pretty hard to tune in. At 91.1 FM, WFMU is one of those left-end tenants, with a signal confined to 1440 watts by the FCC (the average New York major station puts out 50,000). When a big league station's signal is blocked by a water tower next to the transmitter, the station or the tower takes a powder. WFMU just scratches Westchester County. Sheepshead Bay has problems getting it because of an overlapping college station. The iffy stereo signal causes many listeners to flip over to the clearer mono. Fans dance with their dipole antennas, or perhaps crumble them into amusing animal shapes, in vain hope that they will find the *one configuration* for good reception. You deal with it.

At the mass meeting in the basement, the optimism stains the carpet. Freedman gives the latest word on WFMU's new transmitter, triggering hopes that the signal will be a lot better, and some questions from Sunday night gabber the Immigrant and former DJ David Quinlan:

Immigrant: "Where is the new transmitter?"

Freedman: "Right next to the old one."

Quinlan: "What's the security we have for it?"

Freedman: "Pounds. The thing is too heavy to steal."

Quinlan: "What's to keep the forces of repression from building a series of fires around it or something?"

There is no satisfying reply.

The Forces of Repression sneak in the air ducts at Upsala; what hampers the station most is poor cash flow. WFMU is almost completely supported by listeners, though the college does provide studio space. This year's nine-day marathon in April raised $113,000 in pledges. The more successful WFMU is at tugging bucks from its listeners, the more Upsala lets them stand up for themselves. After last year's successful marathon, the college stopped paying for libel insurance, which costs about $2500 a year. Freedman's full-time salary, a salary for the 6:30-to-9 a.m. Jewish music DJ, and pay for part-time engineers Chuck Russo and Dan Andreana currently chomp the largest piece of the budget. Mail, telephones, rent at the transmitter site all eat into the annual nut. According to Freedman, WFMU hasn't purchased studio equipment in nine years, save a set of headphones. By raising more than they spent for the past five years, the station was able to plunk down $26,000 for the new transmitter. The tower's a success without qualification, bringing a clearer signal to many areas.

"I DON'T BELIEVE IN THE ABSOLUTE FREEDOM OF RADIO. YOU CAN GO FROM BACH TO THE BEATLES, BUT THERE'S A RIGHT WAY AND A WRONG WAY."

—IRWIN

WFMU first beamed in 1960, and by 1967 it was perhaps the first station on the East Coast to go free-form, sending a signal out 24 hours a day. The station was so popular at the time it showed up on Arbitron ratings; one of its presiding spirits, Vin Scelsa, went on to the majors and eventually to his current stand at K-ROCK (Sundays, nine to noon.) A few years later a second generation of free-formers matriculated. Someone who worked there in the late '60s remembers the station manager calling everyone into the studio to say, "We're going to do something important, something that might get us shut down." He put the Velvet Underground's brand-new "Heroin" on the turntable. Dick Einhorn, a DJ in 1970 and '71, remembers: "It was a zoo. We were playing the records we couldn't live without. A lot of it was junk, in retrospect, I'm sure. We were having the time of our lives." He recalls writing and performing drug lyrics to "The 12 Days of Christmas," extending "Hey Jude" 's ending for half an hour with a tape loop, broadcasting a four-hour interview with Captain Beefheart.

Which *is* incredibly indulgent. Today you might dub it the return of free-form, but that's not quite right. WFMU DJs don't sound anything like each other—you couldn't fit into the back 40 what distinguishes Montego Joe's cartography of African rhythms around the world (Fridays, noon to 2) from, say, Bill Kelly's "mindless teenage brainrot" music and accompanying readings from the *Weekly World News* (Sundays, 1 to 5 p.m.). The style can plop, the Baby Ruth bar at the bottom of the pool. That's not very often. Your Old Pal Irwin (free-form Tuesdays, 12 to 4; a show of "atrocious music" 10:30 to 11 within another free-form spot Thursdays, 9:30 to midnight) has been at the station since 1975, and the whimsy and reach of his sets have influenced other staffers. "I don't believe in the absolute freedom of radio," he says. "You can go from Bach to the Beatles, but there's a right way and a wrong way." And unlike 1970's freestyle, turning from a string quartet to a garage band doesn't signify any mind-expanding experience by itself. You have to *work* to create a context. Irwin comes in with a box of records, a few singles, some notes, and he doesn't plan more than a song or two ahead. He just can't tell until he's in the hot seat. For Laurie Es., who favors leather-studded-throw-the-settee-at-the-cat musics past and present (Saturdays, 6 to 9 p.m.), a lot depends on how she's feeling. "I like to think that people who listen to my show *know* me. My mood of that week comes across in what I play and say. I play the beginnings and ends of things over my headphones, so I know what music to line up. That's if I want to make a set flow. Sometimes I try to make a direct contradiction, like do a Lydia Lunch song back to back with something from Fred MacMurray, and then come in between with a ridiculous way to tie it in, like saying 'well, Lydia does have a father complex. . . .' " WFMU sports specialty shows also, such as Pat Duncan's hardcore taxonomy (Thursdays, 7 to 9:30 p.m.) and Richard's "Synthetic Pleasure," a stand of electronic music (Mondays, 6:30 to 9 p.m.). Specialty shows bring in the most money during the marathon, but the heart and future of the station is in slipperier airtime. The Immigrant (Sundays, 9 to midnight), for example, does play music, but he's firstly an elliptical rapper with a talent for drawing words that merit out of callers and guests.

One DJ does pasteup for *Screw*, another plays in Wasserman Love Puddle. One delivers flowers to afford his voluminous collection of novelty 78s and real estate information records. One is a bike messenger. If you spilled a barrel of gherkins into the Hudson one stormy midnight, they'd cast as far apart as the WMFU whathaveyous. But, from a sampling of interviews, maybe y'all will understand what kind of person we're dealing with.

The Vanilla Bean (Tuesdays, 9:30 to midnight) likes to talk. He plays great music, white and black, leaning away from pop and toward the funky and funny. But basically, he's a mouthful. "I spent a lot of the time under the sink growing up," he says, "just listening to conversations. My parents used to have marriage encounter groups over, and you would hear *everything*. And my uncle used to be the maître d' at the Copacabana, I'd be schlepped off to his house at times and he'd take me to work. So I'd be running around backstage at the Copa, and that got me interested in show business. Hah."

The Bean's been at WFMU almost seven years. He broke in to college radio some ten years ago at WSOU in South Orange, New Jersey, where he chafed at the format. "Here I am playing 'Bodies' by the Sex Pistols, on a station where you couldn't even play, like, Billy Joel's 'Only the Good Die Young.' So they threw me off the station. Which was okay, because I was disenchanted with college, it was a vacuous wasteland of Jackson Browne and Grateful Dead heads from Bergen County driving Camaros." He laughs this great *estúpido* Ed Norton mewl out the side of his mouth.

HIS TROUBLES WERE BASED IN MOMENTS LIKE THE ON-AIR CALL TO A PHONE SEX SERVICE IN MEMPHIS: BEAN: HOLD IT, I WANT YOU TO TALK ABOUT ELVIS PRESLEY WHILE YOU'RE DOING IT.

"The turning point, what got me involved in WFMU, was when they were doing the marathon. I called them up to tell them the pope had been shot. This was back when Reagan first got elected. So I called up and somebody who answered the phone sounded really harried and said 'Who gives a shit?' and hung up. And I thought, 'Wow, they sound like a great bunch of people!' "

There was a time when the Bean tried stand-up comedy, only to develop an ulcer. Now he's committed to giving others dyspepsia, insulting callers, rooting out dumbness with the WFMU antenna as his divining rod. The guy is hard to take. "I dive whole hog into things, it's like unraveling a baseball when you get to that little core and find out if it's cork or one of those high-bouncer superballs." If the Bean cops to a little more modesty these days, to playing more music and offending fewer people than before, he's still capable of beaning you with a high-hard one at any moment. What chastened him was a three-month suspension last summer. His troubles were based in moments like the on-air call to a phone sex service in Memphis, a session with someone called Tabatha:

Bean: Hold it, I want you to talk about Elvis Presley while you're doing it.

Tabatha: You want to talk about . . . *Elvis Presley?*

Bean: That's right, I want to talk about his hit records, Colonel Tom, and his dog, and his daughter Priscilla and her boyfriend Sean Penn, everything . . .

Tabatha: . . . *Okay*, well . . . I go to his house all the time. I've been inside that mansion, it's got that guitar-shaped swimming pool and everything. His daughter is always screwing around, you always read in the *Enquirer* something about Elvis Presley's daughter, and I just thought it was really bad when he died. And 'Hound Dog' is a really good tune. How are you baby—you jacking on that cock yet?" Bean had to grovel a lot to get back on the air.

An obscenity citation can put a station this size on the ropes, so WFMU codified a policy on playing or talking trash months ago, when they saw FCC revisions coming. According to Friedman, when the FCC investigates complaints of college radio obscenity, it is stations that haven't disciplined "offenders," or that haven't notified the administration of offenses, that are penalized. WFMU skirts both possibilities.

But then, tighter regulations just force a DJ to make that double entendre do an extra half-gainer, as the Radio Hound, perhaps most of all, has exhibited. He dirty. The Radio Hound (Saturdays, 3 to 6 p.m.) is that rare WFMU jock who wasn't a fan before he got a show. He came to New York from Fort Lauderdale in 1977 a stone Iggy Pop fan, though you won't hear a lot of Iggy on his show. The Hound loves rock and roll, he's unhappy with how the orthodoxy—from the critics to the Rock and Roll Hall of Fame—have defined a stay-prest, no-think collective taste. You won't hear the Beatles: "I just think they're really boring, basically. If something's that brightly lit in the media's eye, it just loses all sense of mystery." The Hound plays wildass things you've never heard of that'll make you laugh your ass off wondering how this shit was ever recorded in the first place. Goods damaged and otherwise, like Homer Henderson's "Lee Harvey Was a Friend of Mine." Like king of music Hank Ballard's hard-to-find "Broadway," which struts hotter than "Honky Tonk" and is exactly what it feels like to see Times Square for the first time. Like the Saxons' "Camel Walk," and I heard the Hound say he'd personally shoot any band that covers this one. He believes in the inviolability

of the spirit.

The Hound should be allowed to have his favorite records not melt when he

"I BELIEVE EVERY PARANOID THEORY I'VE EVER HEARD. I BELIEVE THEY SHOOT LASER BEAMS AT PEOPLE'S HEADS TO GET THEM TO COMMIT POINTLESS MURDERS."

—THE HOUND

goes to hell, because *for everyone within range of his voice* he turns what a golden oldie station like WCBS makes go down like milk into something you can get drunk on. He doesn't listen much to radio. "I dunno. Sometimes I'm hearing stuff I like—WKCR can be playing some great music, old blues or gospel, and they put it across in this really dry context that just bores the shit out of me. Like listing all the players' names and giving the session dates and shit . . . they take it and put it on a pedestal. You can't get in a '57 T-Bird and drive it around, you've gotta look at it behind a glass case."

As much as tunes, the Hound's thing is about a disposition, about what it would feel like to bust that T-Bird loose and whip on out to some lurid carnival outside of town, any cop or damned fool in your way reading "Uniroyal" on their backside. The Hound is a *dog* sniffing outside the tent (Inside: BIG HARUM GIRL SHOW!), grunting and growling at the world. At the horseshoe bar on Avenue B, we drink. "It's changed so much in the last two or three years," the Hound grouses. "There's so many things I used to take for granted that we could never do anymore. And they passed a law that you can't smoke in cabs! There's a fucking law against anything I want to do, just about. And now I have neighbors giving me noise complaints—I lived here for nine years without noise complaints, these people telling me they have to get up and go to work in the morning. I don't fucking care. Hey, you're living in the East Village, and you have to get up at eight o'clock to go to work?

"I'm a firm believer in trilateralism and all that," he says, and even hounds can smirk. "I believe every paranoid theory I've ever heard. I believe they shoot laser beams at people's heads to get them to commit pointless murders. It's too scary, there's too many coincidences, too many weird things are happening. It would be nice to see a generation of young kids that just wanted to go out and murder all these people. That would be good."

Uh, that might take a lot of bullets.

"Oh, just *shake them up*. I mean, the arrogance is what's scary, the arrogance and the racism of it. These people are so upfront, they're not even trying to act like they're not, they are just blatantly creepy. The new Supreme Court thing, that's terrifying—have you read any of these guys' words? You just look at them, and they are all such a bunch of hateful people."

WFMU's DJs can't believe that what they get excited about *has to be* concealed, canceled out by stations with bigger signals manned by ignorami who don't even love Madonna or Run-D.M.C. as much as *they* do, let alone Kitty Wells, Lui Hung, Loudon Wainwright III, the Mr. T Experience, Bo Diddley, or the Pontiac Brothers, all of which come from a recent WFMU heavy playlist. Staffers don't condescend to instruct their listeners; their itchy, twitchy feelings speak for themselves. Recently Your Old Pal Irwin thought another DJ had slighted Abba, and retaliated with a block of the Norse Gods, a half-hour of unexpected, Necco candy-colored pop throbbing happily. You can hear the DJs trying to make connections with their estimated 200,000 listeners. And the letters, the 4000 people who pledge money each marathon (not to mention the yet-uncounted who pledged $20,000 *in advance* of this year's fundraiser), the following that supports *Lowest Common Denominator*, all bear out WFMU's success. "The station is there to be used as a musical instrument," says the Vanilla Bean, "and anybody that doesn't is just wasting time, and not being busy. 'Cause we have got to start building somewhere. The station's a good place for people to be picking up all kinds of pieces of information."

In the past seven or eight years, college radio has become extremely important to the music industry. Labels hire representatives to lobby the stations; student DJs introduced acts like REM or the Eurythmics, which went on to break pop. WFMU's peers have their own conventions and tipsheets like *Rockpool* and the *CMJ Report*, which many college jocks rely on too heavily. Generally, stations decline an adversarial status, their connection to commercial radio more like the relationship the Toledo Mudhens enjoy with the Red Sox. Clotted with a preening hipness, stations are sometimes racist, and frequently segregationist: what nonwhite programming the stations permit will be "formatted," or slotted into all-blues, all-reggae, all-rap shows.

Besides record libraries, college stations have a music director and a "priority" bin that DJs draw from. It's the director's job to procure promo records from the labels, and he or she has the most to say about what gets in the priority bin and for how long. That tends to mean the major rock labels—and the established indies—show up in the bins, since they are the only companies automatically servicing (and how) colleges. They call up stations every week and ask how their records are doing, and would you like an interview with Peter Murphy or a couple free passes to the Mojo Nixon show? There are dozens of other labels around, of course, but they will only send records if you go out of your way and ask them to, something not a lot of college stations do. "They're getting these records," says Ken Freedman, "and are being told 'REM is fantastic,' and 'Robyn Hitchcock is God.' They've bought the whole myth of *newness*, they've got the rep fom Elektra records calling up and saying, 'Hey, this is what's happening.'"

The station at Upsala beats this check, for starters, because it's WFMU's policy to regularly move LPs through the new bin and into the library; it's de facto policy, as well, to mostly ignore that bin, to let DJs raid the library—or, crucially, their own collections. The crew's faith that they will never get anywhere in power radio—"It would be like working in a factory," says Laurie Es.—and a laissez-faire relationship with the college help distinguish the station as well. "We're pleased with the station, it's one of the outstanding small college stations in America," says Ed Titus, vice president for academic affairs at Upsala. "The New Jersey chancellor of higher education's wife is a big fan, I know. . . . I was at a meeting in Chicago, and someone came up to me, asked if I was from Upsala College. I thought the response was going to be, 'You're from Upsala College, that's a wonderful school.' Instead it was, 'You're from Upsala College, that's where WFMU comes from.'"

Radio isn't like radio anymore: television is. While it used to be radio's job, now it's the tube that feeds everybody their biggest daily dosage of news, gossip, lies, and entertainment. Mostly radio only seems to exist to sell advertising space, but the people at WFMU (and some other non-commercial dial settings) look at radio as a free space, a white field ripe for the mucking. There's reportedly great, funny, experimental radio from Atlanta's WREK, Boston's WMFO, and I can vouch for Ann Arbor's WCBN; one hears of fine things in the Northwest. But neither these nor WFMU's current success signify any hoped-for pollination of the jet streams, any spreading of Hasil Adkins and free-form around the map. There just aren't many places where the disaffected and the fanatic live in numbers large enough to support the floating circus. Ultimately, if it is democratic, responding to the word from its listeners, WFMU is also tinged with something like elitism, as well. It's indispensable to the station's success.

The gist of many arguments about cultural elitism appeared when C. M. Kornbluth's "The Marching Morons" was published in a 1951 number of the magazine *Galaxy Science Fiction*. It's basically about how in the next century "smart" genes were bred out while "dumb" ones triumphed: a dwindling group of brains is enslaved by five billion inferiors, the smarties sweating blood to administrate a planet collapsing under the weight of its own stupidity. A slave says of the ruling class: "My God, how they bred!" And if WFMU feels a tight bond with its audience, fans also know that the demesne outside WFMU's listening range, and wherever toes are atappin' to Club Nouveau or Bruce Hornsby, that place where it's hip to be square, there is the citadel. It's the world. And, my God, how they breed. A sizable population of WFMU DJs value the pop experience, they know what it's like to have the radio surprise you, to make you feel that *somebody's out there*: they (like a high percentage of their listeners, I wager) had radio-under-the-pillow experiences growing up. Various DJs will hold out for Vin Scelsa, Howard Stern, Cowboy Joe, "Stormy Monday," Soupy Sales (I swear!), but they don't find much like personality or surprise or warmth or a community on any of the big stations and you shouldn't either.

In a reactionary moment, in a moment when radio means so little, people who simply want *more* find the avant-gardists unexpectedly at the next table. And—fuck it—they break bread together. "I've got a roommate," says Irwin, "and I could try to turn her on to Robyn Hitchcock or XTC, but she doesn't want to bother. She's got her Billy Joel, she's got her Sade, she's got her Andreas Vollenweider. *They comfort her.* She comes home, and WFMU's on, the Hound is on, or the Vanilla Bean, or 'Synthetic Pleasure,' and *she doesn't hear it.* It's as if she's deaf and it's not on. A lot of people are deaf to music. Well, I'm not trying to appeal to them." ■